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ABSTRACT

Practical information is provided, in a question and answer format, for community college officials who are planning to conduct a community needs assessment. A brief discussion of the usefulness of needs assessment surveys to the college planning process is followed by descriptions of eight steps to be followed in planning and conducting a survey: (1) defining the purpose of the survey; (2) defining the survey population; (3) choosing a survey technique and determining the sample size; (4) drawing a random sample; (5) designing a questionnaire; (6) pre-testing the questionnaire; (7) administering the survey instrument; and (8) tabulating and analyzing the responses. Next, several methods of conducting surveys are considered and their advantages and disadvantages discussed. Mailed questionnaires, personal interviews, and telephone interviews are evaluated in terms of cost, respondent and interviewer bias, depth of information obtainable, response rates, interviewer training needs, and other areas. Next, model needs assessment surveys that have been conducted by community colleges are briefly described. A list of sources for additional information concludes the fact sheet. (JP)

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FACT SHEET

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COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEYS

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FACT SHEET

No. 1

Community Needs Assessment Surveys

What is a community needs assessment survey? Why would a community college conduct such a survey?

A community needs assessment survey consists of asking a group of community members a set of questions about their characteristics, their opinions of the college and its programs, their reasons for attending or not attending the college, and their educational interests.

A researcher conducts a community needs assessment survey to determine the interest in and need for new programs, to identify barriers to attendance, to evaluate the need for a new educational center, or to assess community awareness of the college and its offerings.

The data acquired from a needs assessment survey is analyzed and used in both short-term and long-range planning. With accurate knowledge of community needs and characteristics, administrators can design an effective marketing approach, evaluate the college's service to the community, or decide what programs and services to offer.

How do I conduct a needs assessment survey?

1. **Define the purpose of the survey.** The exact information needed, who will use it, and what it will be used for should be determined in the earliest planning stage. The purpose of the survey will often determine what members of the community should participate and what items should be included in the questionnaire. At this point, consider what sources there are for the information needed other than survey responses. A survey may not be necessary.

2. **Define your population.** For example, if the purpose of the survey is to determine the need of area nurses for continuing education, the population might include nurses and hospital administrators in the college service area.

3. **Decide on the survey procedure and sample size.** There are three commonly used techniques for surveying a population: mailed questionnaires, personal interviews, and telephone interviews. Each of these techniques has advantages and disadvantages. Choosing the appropriate technique involves considering the depth of the questions to be asked, the size of the sample to be surveyed, and the time, funds, and personnel available to conduct the survey.

4. **Draw a random sample.** If your population is too large for each individual to be administered the survey instrument, the responses of a properly drawn random sample can accurately reflect the opinions of the entire population. For a sample to be truly random, each individual in the population must have an equal chance of being chosen to participate in the survey.

5. **Design a questionnaire.** The techniques used to administer the questionnaire will to a certain extent determine the form of the items on the questionnaire. For example, it is often inadvisable to include complex items on a

mailed questionnaire. In general, the items should be clear, concise, and to the point. Avoid leading questions, hypothetical situation questions, and acronyms and abbreviations. To facilitate analysis later, elicit only one piece of information with each item. While designing the questionnaire, keep in mind the requirements of the tabulation technique that has been chosen.

6. **Pre-test the questionnaire.** Responses to the pre-test by respondents similar to the actual survey population will uncover those items that are ambiguous or unclear and those that do not elicit the information that they were designed to collect. The pre-test gives the researcher a chance to react to unanticipated problems before they become costly.

7. **Administer the survey instrument.** Be sure to allow enough time for proper administration. In the case of a mailed questionnaire, time should be allotted to send follow-up cards to initial non-respondents. In the case of a telephone survey, time is needed to call back individuals who cannot be reached on the first call. Be sure that your procedures ensure the confidentiality of the responses.

8. **Tabulate and analyze the responses.** One of the primary criticisms of needs assessment surveys conducted by community colleges is underutilization of survey results. Extract as much information as possible from the responses to the survey to ensure that the data is as useful as possible in as many ways as possible. Then distribute the information to all those concerned along with an explanation and analysis of the findings.

What methods are there for conducting a survey? What are the advantages and disadvantages of using each of these approaches?

Mailed Questionnaires

The mailed survey or questionnaire involves the use of an instrument which is mailed to a sample of persons living in a community.

Advantages

1. **Low Cost.** Costs are reduced due to the minimal staff, training, and supervision required. The expenses involved in mailed questionnaires are primarily in typing, duplicating, and mailing. This approach is less expensive than personally interviewing a similar number of people.

2. **Practical in Large Geographical Areas.** Mailed questionnaires enable colleges with large service areas to reach their constituents effectively.

3. **Reduces Bias.** It avoids any potential biases of the interviewer. The individual's responses will not be influenced by the interviewer's prejudices, conduct, and physical appearance. With a mailed questionnaire all respondents receive the same set of questions and the same set of directions word for word.

4. **Facilitates Tabulation of Responses.** Questionnaires made up of objective questions can be designed for quick keypunching, machine scoring, or hand counting. Most computing facilities have statistical packages available which contain programs that can be used to score and analyze the data.

Disadvantages

1. **Low Response Rate.** With a mailed survey, the possibility exists of having only a small percentage of the questionnaires that are sent out returned. Should this occur, the respondents may not be representative of the population surveyed. Special procedures, such as follow-up letters, can be used to maximize the response rate.

2. **Differences in Respondents' Interpretation of Survey Questions.** The respondents' interpretation and understanding of questions is not always uniform and complete. This problem can be avoided by careful item construction.

3. **Respondent Considerations.** The mailed questionaire is inappropriate for those with reading difficulties and those with certain kinds of physical handicaps.

4. **Limited Depth of Information Obtained.** The use of a mailed questionnaire limits the ability to ask an individual what they had in mind by a particular response.

Personal Interview

In a personal interview, the researcher and respondent carry on a face-to-face conversation following a more or less flexible format.

Advantages

1. **High Response Rate.** The personal contact with the interviewer can influence a person to participate in the survey. The fact that in an increasing number of households all adults work during the day can limit the importance of this effect.

2. **Greater Depth.** Questions of greater complexity can be answered since the interviewer is available to make relatively detailed explanations and to ask follow-up questions.

Discdvantages

1. **High Cost.** Because of staff salaries and training and travel costs, the personal interview method is more expensive than the other techniques discussed.

2. **Bias.** The greatest possibility of bias occurs with this technique because the interviewer's presence may influence the respondent to give socially acceptable responses.

3. **Extensive Training Required.** Since it is difficult to control and supervise interviewers in the field, it is important to train the interviewers thoroughly to ensure that they are conducting the interviews and recording the responses adequately. Finding individuals who are able to learn the technique and continue with the project until its completion is difficult.

Telephone Interviews

The telephone interview technique involves the development of a questionnaire or survey form and the selection of representative numbers to be dialed by the interviewers.

Advantages

1. **Low Cost.** The cost of conducting telephone interviews is substantially below that of person-to-person interviews (many more persons can be contacted for the same amount of resources expended), but not necessarily below that of a mailed survey. The availability of wide-area telephone service (WATS) has made the telephone a relatively inexpensive method of gathering data from a large area.

2. **Opportunity to Expand Responses.** Conducting a survey over the telephone allows the interviewer to ask follow-up questions to clarify or expand upon responses. This procedure obtains more complete information than the mailed questionnaire.

3. **High Response Rate.** Telephoning permits the questioner multiple chances to reach the persons selected to participate in the survey. Re-contacting is much more economical by telephone than in person-to-person interviewing. By obtaining a high response rate, the investigators increase the chances of receiving responses from all segments of the target population.

4. **Practical in Large Geographical Areas.** Like mailed questionnaires, telephone interviews enable colleges with large service areas to reach their constituents effectively.

Disadvantages

1. **Exclusion of People Without Access to Telephones or With Unlisted Telephone Numbers.** This problem may be encountered when numbers are randomly selected from a telephone directory. It can be avoided by using a random digit dialing technique.

2. **Need to Train Interviewers.** Effective use of this method requires that staff be trained to ask questions and to record responses effectively.

3. **Respondent Bias.** The tendency to give socially desirable responses occurs more frequently with interviews conducted over the telephone than through the mail.

4. **Credibility.** Telephone interviewers have no opportunity to legitimate their positions through the presentation of visible credentials. This can serve to lower the response rate or limit the types of questions the respondent will answer.

Have other community colleges conducted needs assessment surveys that could serve as models?

Broward Community College (Grady, 1979) developed a low cost needs assessment process to be used in cooperation with the public school system. The assessment was initiated by college administrators who needed information to plan appropriate programs and services for the residents living in a newly created service area. The needs assessment process included assessing resources, reviewing other assessment projects, establishing a survey team, meeting with key groups, developing a research design, and meeting after the completion of the survey.

The Adult Learning Project was conducted to determine the education needs and conditions related to adult learning in Johnson County, Texas, and to ascertain the attitudes of area residents toward Hill Junior College (Hutchins, 1978). Students hand-delivered the survey instruments to the houses of the participants.

During the late spring, summer, and early fall of 1978, a comprehensive household survey of the adult population of Southeastern Connecticut was conducted by Mohegan Community College (Segal and Others, 1979). The survey focused on respondents' characteristics, educational background, employment, level of satisfaction with regional educational opportunities, the accuracy of information adults possessed, the preferred sources of information, the level of interest and the reasons adults had for pursuing learning activities, the kinds of learning formats adults preferred, the obstacles that prevented adults from satisfying their educational needs, and the kinds of educational services adults expected to receive.

A community needs survey of Wytheville Community College's service area was conducted to determine what area residents knew about the college and the community services that it provides (Lauth and Zabek, 1978). In early December 1977, phone calls were made to randomly selected prospective participants to solicit their participation in the survey; 762 of these agreed to participate, and over 76% ultimately returned questionnaires.

Coast Community College District conducted a telephone survey of area residents during Spring 1980 to assess citizen awareness of the District's programs and to determine area educational needs (Butler, 1980). The survey sample was selected through the use of computer-generated, four-digit random numbers which were then randomly linked to the various telephone prefixes that serve the District's residents. Approximately 4,800 individual telephone numbers were dialed to obtain completed interviews with 546 residents, representing a geographically stratified random sample of the District's population.

Where can I obtain additional information?

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